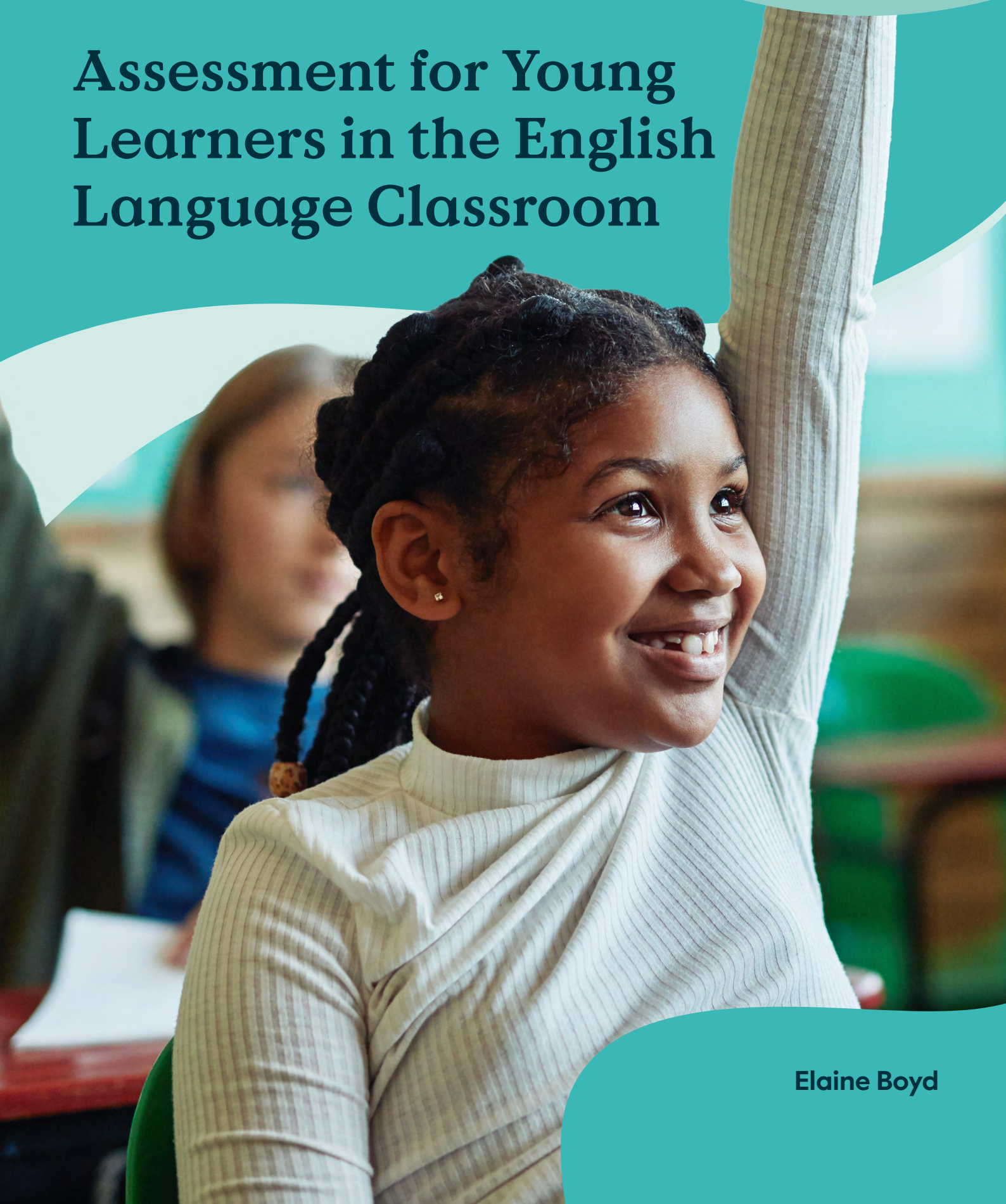
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Assessment for Young Learners in the English Language Classroom



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Introduction

All forms of assessment have an impact on school and classroom culture – it can drive what is taught and how. The process and outcomes of assessment also affect both the teachers' and the learners' understanding and experience of learning (Edwards, 2013). Our most common understanding of assessment is that it summarises attainment. This has an especially strong focus in education where **summative** assessments, the achievement tests that typically occur at the end of an instructional programme, have guided the emphasis in curricula (Harlen, 2013). In true terms, however, assessment is the process of collecting and interpreting evidence to make judgements about a learner's performance (Harlen, 2007). Thinking about the process in this way allows teachers to gather evidence as an ongoing activity during the learning programme and, as a result, to identify strengths and weaknesses that inform future classroom content. This **formative** approach, where assessment forms part of the learning cycle, is able to capture more detailed and nuanced data about a learner's performance than the broader brush stroke of a summative score and consequently supports deeper and more consequential learning. More importantly, there is an influential argument that, in education, we should not even be doing assessment unless it has an impact on learning (Black & William, 1998), and this goes to the heart of the purposes of assessment.

Recent shifts in thinking about assessment (Lum, 2015; Bland, 2015) have put the formative approach centre stage, as we now recognise more fully that embedded classroom assessments can support learning by defining next steps for the individual learner and the teacher (Gardner et al., 2020). At the same time, teachers are increasingly aware of the importance and impact of measuring understanding and progress as part of the learning process. It is now recognised that ongoing, integral assessment is not only a powerful tool in driving learning (ATL, 1996) but that the process can also benefit children's social and cognitive development. This understanding has developed into a systemic approach referred to as **Learning Oriented Assessment (LOA)**, a concept captured by Carless (2007), which emphasises that all types of assessment can support and enhance learning. This includes recognising that preparation for summative assessments can contribute to learning progression along with ongoing formative assessments.

One challenge for teachers is that educational assessment has long been the domain of 'experts', guided as it is by fierce ethical principles (AERA, 2014) and this leads to concerns about whether teachers themselves should be 'doing' assessment. Yet who could be more expert than the teacher who, consciously or subconsciously, evaluates how learning is happening in every class and who knows their students? Despite this recognition of their skills, teachers' apprehension about making judgements is not a light concern. Assessment of any kind can shape self-esteem and motivation – something that is a particular worry with young learners who are still forming a relationship with the educational process. These significant, and potentially damaging, consequences can make teachers nervous about formalising any assessment process, especially with younger learners.

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It is, therefore, vital that teachers have the opportunity to develop their **assessment literacy** (Klenowski & Wyattt-Smith, 2014) to enable them to design an effective assessment programme. This helps to ensure that both they and the learners can have confidence in the outcomes of the process. It also enables teachers to evaluate summative tests, which may be externally imposed and outside of their control, in order to support learners in the best way.

The various terminologies for assessment tend to be used interchangeably but it is useful to consider the different dimensions of assessment as outlined in Ioannou-Georgiou (2003):

- **Evaluation** is generally used for examining how far a learning programme meets its goals.
- Some assessment may be part of that, but this would include stakeholders' views and attitudes to textbooks as well as lesson content.
- **Assessment** is a broad term that refers to all methods used to collect information about learners' knowledge, ability, understanding, attitude
- and motivation. Assessment now encompasses a very wide range of strategies to collect the data necessary for these competences.
- **Testing** is one part of assessment and is usually used to assess achievement. The outcome is a quantifiable result represented by a mark or grade.

This illustrates that there are multiple purposes to assessment and one of the first principles of educational measurement is that we should understand why we are conducting any assessment. In other words, why are we collecting evidence and making a judgement about the learner's ability?

We might collect evidence in order to:

- check understanding and learning and the depth of that learning
- facilitate progress through feedback resulting from the assessment
- motivate learners by sharing evidence of their progress
- monitor teaching input and plan future work
- provide information to feedback to parents, carers, etc.
- collect evidence of achievement or progress for relevant authorities (formative or summative)
- report a mark or grade as evidence of achievement (summative).

It is important to understand that it is the purpose of an assessment activity, not the content of it, which defines if it is for learning (formative) or of learning (summative). Formative assessment is generally seen as an iterative process with a focus on informed feedback, in contrast to summative testing, which focuses on the outcome from a single event. In the case of young learners, there is debate about how appropriate summative assessment is, especially as it is an assessment where the content may be outside the control of the teacher. However, as noted earlier, preparation for summative assessments can be learning-oriented and contribute to the variety of ways in which we can use assessment to inform learning. Therefore, our focus here will mainly be on formative assessment: that is, assessment which is incorporated as part of learning activity.

The Assessment Reform Group (ARG 1999: 7) defined the following features of formative assessment:

- it is embedded in, and reflects and complements, the pedagogies of the classroom
- it involves sharing learning goals with pupils
- it aims to help pupils to know and to recognise the standards they are aiming for
- it involves pupils in self-assessment
- it provides feedback which leads to pupils recognising their next steps and how to take them
- it is underpinned by confidence that every student can improve;
- it involves both teacher and pupils reviewing and reflecting on assessment data

This paper will focus on approaches to classroom assessment for young learners and the principles that need to be embedded in such assessments. This includes the practical implications for teachers in incorporating assessment within normal classroom practice and a description of the different strategies that can be used to collect evidence of learning.

First, we need to consider the particular qualities of young learners which will affect the design and delivery of classroom assessments.



What do we need to consider when assessing young learners?

The young learners we refer to in this paper are children who are between 5 and 12 years of age and who are in primary education. In this context, they may be learning English as a subject (i.e. taught as another language ESL/EFL/ EAL) or using English as part of a bilingual or multilingual programme for learning other subjects (CLIL). Although there is inevitably significant variation in learners' maturity (social, emotional and cognitive) and learning experiences as well as their overall background, they tend to be similar in terms of their relationship with education. These dimensions all affect why, how and what we can or should assess.

Young learners as a group: similarities

There are certain practical and behavioural features, noted by Enever (2015), that young learners are likely to have in common with each other but which differentiate them from older learners:

- They have not chosen to learn.
- They have a short attention span.
- They have highly specific areas of interest.
- They tend to have anxiety about what their parents think.
- Their progression is non-linear.

Each of these shared features has a direct impact on aspects of assessment design, which are outlined in detail later. However, there is one over-arching feature which underpins everything else. One of the most significant common aspects of this age group of young learners is that they are especially vulnerable to any deficiencies or weaknesses in an assessment process (Cooper & Collins, 2009). Their emerging understanding of their individual and group identities and feelings of self-worth and resilience can be easily distorted by judgements, or negatively affected by assessment techniques (Ioannou-Georgiou, 2003). When talking about assessments, we often refer to high stakes versus low stakes testing, with high stakes generally seen as the large standardised tests which give access to mobility, study or work and low stakes commonly understood to be classroom-based assessments, which are frequently perceived as 'not mattering'. However, with young learners there is arguably no such thing as a low stakes test. Everything – even the smallest, quick vocabulary quiz on a Friday – is 'high stakes' in the mind of the young learner because of how the outcome of the quiz makes the child feel. This means that not only is it vital for any assessment to be transparent in its fairness but also that assessments for young learners should focus on, and be scaffolded for, success. It also entails



that teachers need to design a holistic approach to assessment, rather than simply conducting test-type tasks, in order to give young learners a range of contexts in which they can demonstrate their competences. The practical applications of this aspect are outlined in later sections.

Young learners as individuals: differences

Most teachers will recognise the significant developmental differences in their young learners both within the same age group and across the whole young learner age group. Hasselgreen and Caudwell (2016) divide this group into two strands where the 5 to 8-year-olds are often still learning their first language(s), are dependent on repetition and may only produce very simple writing and physical responses when speaking. This is in contrast to the older age group of 9 to 12-year-olds, who are capable of more complex thought, have wider world knowledge and interests and a slightly longer attention span with a focus on modeling and role play[1]. An additional challenge for teachers is that, especially in the younger age bracket, there are likely to be significant and multi-faceted individual differences which any assessment system must be sufficiently flexible to accommodate.

Linguistic, cognitive and social development

This age grouping is reinforced by the recent collection of Language Descriptors collected from European Language Portfolios in Goodier and Szabo (2018), who have developed a framework for each age group. Children's skills in managing and understanding school and learning vary enormously from age 5, where attitudes at home may provide the most significant influence, to age 12, when learners are defining their own relationship with, and understanding of, the educational process and system, i.e. what constitutes success in the classroom. Shaffer and Kipp (2010) summarise the shift from Piaget's perspective whereby children in the younger age group generally function by responding to the world around them and only see things from their own perspective, to an operational stage in the older group where children develop logical thought and understand that there are other perspectives. The significance of this for assessment is that it becomes vital that assessment is relevant to the children's daily lives and knowledge of the world and, given the likely differences even within a single class, that any assessment is flexible enough to accommodate different levels within the developmental stages. This is equally true for linguistic and social development, especially in the younger age group, where a child's home background and experiences may define the environment that they understand.

1 This grouping is reinforced by the recent publications of Language Descriptors in the CEFR (2018), which has developed a framework for each age group.

Identity as part of learning

As well as dealing with their emerging identities in other contexts, young learners of English are likely to be affected by the context of their learning. In an ESL setting, there may be a focus on using English for communicative purposes, i.e. if they want to express themselves in another language and ultimately as global citizens. In a CLIL setting, English may be used as a bilingual tool as part of equipping learners to talk and write about their different subjects at school. This may affect their relationship with the language differently. In ESL, they may be confused about expressing themselves in a different way to their first language(s) and, as they are so young, struggle to see the point of their learning. In CLIL, they may be frustrated at not being able to communicate their knowledge of or expertise in a subject.

Given that young learners may approach language learning differently due to developmental differences, and that they may have different associations with English, it is essential that individual learners understand the purpose of any assessment and the impact of the outcomes (Maley in Ioannou-Georgiou, 2003). This can be achieved with young learners by including them in the design and delivery of the assessments and allowing them to collaborate on the judging process. In fact, most current research claims this involvement is essential for effective learning outcomes (Stobart, 2008; Wiliam, 2018). The research indicates that any assessment needs to be, 'made by, with and alongside the child', (Hay in Earle, 2019:68) and focused on developing confidence and competence. In other words, young learners will be able to approach assessments without anxiety and with positive feelings if they understand why they are being tested and what the results mean for their learning.

The multiple factors that affect children's learning also entail that, as with learning, assessments should reflect a rich and holistic approach that is, 'not seen narrowly in terms of measurable linguistic outcomes but in terms of [...] the more elusive social, psychological, cognitive, metacognitive, affective and emotional benefits that underpin children's learning and success', (Read in Bland 2015:xi). These approaches ensure that assessments will support children and protect and enhance their self-esteem.

What are the principles we need to consider when designing assessments for young learners?

The single most important consideration when conducting any assessment is that it is fair. When we design assessments, however small or informal, we have an ethical responsibility to ensure that any judgement resulting from that assessment has a valid and reliable basis (AERA, 2014). Validity means that any assessment has to assess what we intend it to. Reliability means that the test has to be the same experience for every student and to give, as far as possible, an accurate picture of their competence. When these principles underpin an assessment or assessment programme, it gives everyone – teachers, students, parents, principals – confidence in the outcomes. Organisations which produce formal, standardised tests invest heavily in research to make sure their tests are valid and reliable. These principles are equally important for teacher-designed classroom assessments. Therefore, understanding how the principles of validity and reliability operate is a core part of assessment literacy for teachers so that they can ensure fairness is embedded in any assessments which they design and conduct. But how can we ensure classroom assessments are valid and reliable?

Validity

Validity essentially means deciding exactly what we are assessing – the **construct** – before we design the assessment in order to make sure we do not include challenges that may affect the learner's performance (Black & William, 2012). For example, if we are assessing speaking, learners should not be required to read a lot of information in order to do the speaking task in case their performance is affected by misunderstanding when reading. Equally, in a listening assessment, the test takers should not be required to read lengthy or complex questions because the assessment is focused on listening and not reading skills. Likewise, assessments of grammatical competence should not be dependent on understanding vocabulary which is out of the learner's range. These **construct irrelevant** elements can skew the learner's performance and thus the data on which we are basing our judgement. In the classroom, this means it is essential to have an explicit focus for what the assessment is measuring and that this focus can be clearly explained to learners.

Reliability

Reliability in classroom assessment is important in the sense that the teacher can rely on the results as a fair measure of a learner's performance. With younger learners, classroom assessments tend to be, and should be, more holistic in approach and the ongoing nature of formative assessment means it happens over time. This means that reliability emerges from the consistency of patterns the teacher sees in a learner's progression (or lack thereof). One area of concern for many teachers is reliability in judging the productive skills – speaking and writing. The most important factor in supporting reliability is designing very clear and transparent criteria and having examples of the standards of performance. Criteria can be developed from the learning objectives and ideally should be agreed with the learning group. This involvement of the learners means they can also help with assessment, for example, of each other's performances. If the assessment leans towards more summative ends then any judgements can be moderated with colleagues to agree how far an individual has met an objective. In classroom assessments, reliability is also supported by consistent timing, measurable results and record keeping across time.

As well as these two core principles of assessment, there are specific principles which apply to young learners to ensure that any assessment remains a positive experience. Key to this is the understanding, described earlier, that children need to participate in formative assessment processes so that they can be actively involved in their learning (Crichton & McDaid, 2016).

All assessment tasks for young learners need to pay attention to the following features:

1. Preparation

It is common for teachers to prepare learners for any assessment by making sure the test takers understand the format of the test and what they might be expected to do. However, we traditionally think of assessment as being 'unseen'. There is also sometimes the notion that younger learners should not be aware they are being tested in order to make them less anxious. Recent research indicates the opposite: that children should be active participants and owners of their own learning, however young they are (Wiliam, 2018). Preparation, therefore, is not only critical for fairness and success, but needs to be as broad as possible in scope. For example, a productive assessment task in speaking or writing should involve as much discussion and draft versioning as possible before the actual assessment by the teacher. This ensures that the children know entirely what is expected of them and have the tools to do this successfully.

2. Clear instructions

For any tasks, children need explicit scaffolding (Smith & Hackling, 2016). This will generally include modelling and collaboration with the learners to ensure they understand what they need to do. Children have an innate sense of fairness and will have a damaging experience if they feel they did not understand what to do. It is worth spending time making sure every individual has a clear understanding of what is required of them by using direct questioning, pair and class discussion and by asking learners to summarise what they are expected to do.

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3. Agreed judgement criteria

One of the key ways we can involve learners in the assessment experience and in their own learning is to agree any judgement criteria with them. This can be done even with very young children. Once they understand what they will have to do in any assessment, it's possible to elicit and agree the criteria. For example, if in class the children have been practising a specific aspect of pronunciation or turn taking in speaking, they and the teacher can agree on the criteria for any assessment task, based on what they have been practising. By involving children in this process, this will likely lead to much more engagement from them. A further point here is that, especially with the younger age group, it is better to have a single judgement criterion. In the case above, for example, having pronunciation as a single focus is important for very young children. A wider picture of overall performance can be built up over time from a series of tasks so that each week a different aspect of speaking can be assessed.

4. Qualitative not quantitative outcomes

Assessment is very typically associated with scoring or grading, i.e. quantitative results which can be compared across cohorts. This tends to emerge from assessments which are binary and have a wrong and a right answer and/or scores assigned to grades in, e.g. the productive skills. When assessing young learners there are several reasons why scoring may not be appropriate.

If scoring requires a binary response (e.g. in a vocabulary or grammar test or reading or listening comprehension questions), it does not really give the teacher information about the quality of the children's learning and it may be unreliable. Their response may be a guess and a crude score of e.g. 80% correct does not really help to illustrate how a child can improve. This latter point is vital for progressing in their learning.

Scoring by numbers tends to lead to comparisons and this can be intimidating and stressful for young learners (Ioannou-Georgiou, 2003). Classroom assessment should as far as possible be individualised and allow some degree of success for each learner. The judgement needs to be scaled and qualitative so it allows for additional factors such as how much effort the child put in to the task.

For classroom assessment, it is best to avoid scoring. Aiming for descriptive judgements and scaling (e.g. *good, very good,* etc.) will give a better picture over time of a child's progress and show them how to make improvements in the areas necessary.

5. Feedback which focuses on only one aspect of learning

The main aim of formative assessment is to provide feedback for learning. This connects with the point above about scaled grading. However, the working memory of young learners means we have to consider the cognitive load of the information we are giving them (Fisher & Godwin, 2014; Ragsdale, 2019). Giving too much feedback can make it hard for young learners to understand where to direct their attention and can consequently be demotivating – the very opposite of what we want to achieve with classroom assessments. Young learners need feedback which focuses on only one aspect of learning. That is, a single focus that they understand and which is accompanied by a task of how to improve. For example, fluency on a speaking task or accuracy on a writing task or learning strategies when assessing how they attempted a task. Give students feedback on this single criterion and a short task which will help them to improve[2].

The main aim of formative assessment is to provide feedback for learning.

In addition to these factors, there are several considerations which influence assessment design related to the commonalities we outlined in the previous section (see next page).

2 See the Cambridge Paper in English Language Education on Giving feedback to language learners for more information.

Further considerations for assessment design

Young learners have not chosen to learn	This means the children may not be very motivated, so assessments need to be positive challenges with plenty of support so that these young learners can see and experience success. This success is likely to nurture their motivation. By ensuring very clear preparation and by using a range of assessment tools, we can ensure that all children achieve some measure of success. For example, they can be assessed on their approach or concentration as well as their competence in the task.
Young learners have a short attention span	This means that any assessment has to be within the bounds of that span depending on the children's age. This indicates that tasks need to be limited and have a very clear and singular focus in order to capture the children's engagement. For example, a short 4-turn speaking exchange will probably be enough for children in the younger group but after they reach 8 years of age they should be able to cope with a longer role play.
Young learners have highly specific areas of interest	Even though children across the young learner age group will widen their experiences, primary level children tend to have very specific and personal interests. No assessment can account for all of these and there will be inevitable variation between children, so where possible, tasks should be designed so that they are flexible enough to allow individuals to express their own interest. This will also increase motivation as the children can relate their learning to their own lives. For example, if you want to assess their use of past tenses and decide to ask them to speak or write about their weekend, avoid mixing the grammar focus with assessing vocabulary (e.g. of leisure activities). This means the children can use the vocabulary most relevant to them.
Young learners tend to have anxiety about what their parents think	This relates to the idea that all assessment is high stakes for young learners. They will only want to report success to their parents, so assessments must be flexible enough to allow each child some form of success. For example, they may make some mistakes in a task but can be rewarded for completing the task on time or with enthusiasm. This is why it is important to use a range of assessment tools so that each child has the opportunity to succeed at certain points.
Young learner progression is non-linear	This means we cannot assume that what a child appears to know one week they will know the next week, or even that because they know one thing we can use that to lead to the next thing. For assessment, this means that we should allow a lot of repetition. This is in itself a learning tool at this age, as noted earlier, and so it may be that we repeat assessment tasks. If the children perform better and better each time, this will give them a model of success. For example, this works especially well with the productive skills where within a single lesson or over time they can repeat tasks creating a better and better version each time.

Best practice in assessment



The most important uses of formative assessment are to inform teachers about the impact of their teaching on learning and to make learning 'visible' for the learners (Hattie, 2012). These two outcomes need to work together with best practice to ensure that any assessments not only follow assessment principles but also show results that are meaningful to both teachers and learners.

This section outlines best practices for assessing young learners and suggests how these practices can be followed. However, as young learners vary in maturity, learning experiences and background, teachers will need to judge how far each option is suitable for their class and how to adapt if necessary. In terms of formative assessment, there is wide range of tools, which gives the teacher flexibility to take account of individual and group differences and to decide on how formal or test-like the mode should be.

We have discussed the fact that any classroom assessment for young learners should closely reflect and complement the pedagogies of that classroom (ARG, 1999). This can be difficult for teachers to demonstrate, especially as they tend to constantly assess informally as they are teaching. However, as Maley (in Ioannou-Georgiou, 2003:2) notes, 'aims, criteria and measurable results', give any assessment a distinct focus and make it different from normal teaching.

Planning

A key feature to support effective and fair assessment is planning. It is essential that assessment strategies are not an 'add-on' but are central to the organisation of the course and each lesson.

1. Planning for progress

Formative assessment needs to be part of an overall programme of learning, and so it is best to develop an assessment plan by year, by month, by week and by lesson. It is a good idea to design any formative assessment to start as early as possible in order to motivate students and help direct their learning as soon as possible (Race, 2009). Having a start point which assesses what children know or can do and then comparing this to where they need to get to across the course or week helps inform lesson planning for progress. There are different ways to approach this, but what is important is to be able to define how classroom assessment will operate so that it forms part of overall teaching and is an objective framework. This overall plan will also help with timing. It is important to find a balance between frequent assessment and too much assessment and to ensure learners have enough time between assessments to reflect and act upon the feedback they are given.

Ensure learners have enough time between assessments to reflect and act upon the feedback they are given.

2. Planning the learning loop

Within an overall plan for the year or month, a specific learning loop can be defined and, again, these might be activated in different ways. The focus is to ensure that there is an iterative loop which is staged to understand where learners are, how they will be assessed and what the outcome will be.

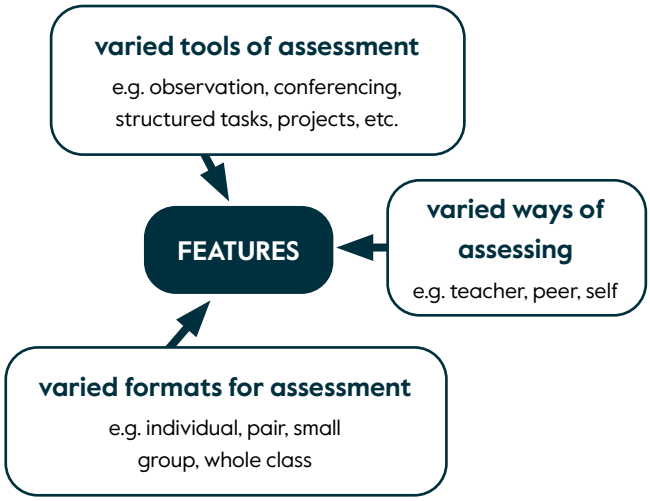
Stage	Example 1	Example 2
Before teaching	Decide how to assess learning with clear descriptions or examples of what success will look like.	Include in lesson plans the key questions you will use to assess learning during the lesson.
During teaching	Make sure learning objectives and success criteria are shared or agreed with the class. Encourage children to ask questions to clarify their understanding. Model what the children are finding difficult.	Ask direct questions to elicit understanding and 'thinking' questions (Why? How?) to check understanding by asking children to explore learning points further. Make adjustments to planned teaching in situ depending on children's responses.
After teaching	Evaluate learning outcomes against the success criteria with the children. Allow time for the children to respond to marking or feedback in the next lesson.	Identify children who need either (a) further support or (b) additional challenge. Make adjustments to planning next lessons based on needs that emerge from the process.

Table 1: Examples of the ongoing loop of formative assessment

In each cycle, consider what are the objectives, the criteria, the task, and the aims for feedback. Make sure you understand how the results will be used.

3. Planning for flexibility

Given the variable nature of the development stages for individual young learners, it is essential to use the very widest possible range of assessment tools. This ensures that assessment is accessible to all and that no child is left behind in the assessment process because every child has the opportunity to demonstrate their competence. This gives you a holistic picture of their progress which, given their age, is more valuable than a focus on specific points. Make sure any plan for the week, month or course uses the full range of assessment options. Features to include are:



4. Record keeping

As part of planning, it is helpful to consider how to keep a record of the assessment points. Record keeping is an important part of reliability, consistency and objectivity when reporting progress to others and, of course, it also allows the teacher to see progress and degrees of progress over time. Ideally, records should consist of a tracking sheet for each individual learner with tabs to note the learning objectives and the different points assessed, together with notes on feedback. These records can be shared and discussed with the learners if desirable but sharing may be more appropriate for the older group than very young ones.

Example progress sheet:

Name	Louisa A.
Learning objective	Can describe family (physical)
Assess task 1 / date	9th Oct Observation: paired task criterion: range of language
Performance	Good
Feedback	Needs to comment on all 3 things: height, hair, eyes
Assess task 2	. . .

Figure 1: Example progress sheet

Tools for classroom assessment

Conferencing

Using deep questioning – or conferencing – can be one of the most powerful ways to check how far a learner understands and can use language. Deep questions can be used to assess how well the learners know something, i.e. the quality of their understanding. This type of assessment questioning differs from the usual classroom questions because of how a teacher uses the information. With assessment questioning, the teacher is using questions to find out about the learners' understanding and proficiency in skills and concepts.

The effect of deep questioning is also that the learners have to 'perform' through answering and this is a learning experience in itself. Assessment does not have to depend on wrong or right answers because we can, for example, assess how fully a learner engages with questions as part of behavioural progression. Assessment questions should not be yes/no questions but deep questioning that allows learners to explore their ideas and reasoning. These open questions can take the form of:

- Questions which explore what they know already, e.g.
  - Which of these questions can you do?
  - Which is the most difficult question?
  - How many ways do you know how to ...?
  - Look at these two answers: which is right? Which is wrong? (Why?)

- Questions which encourage deeper thinking ranging from literal to higher order, e.g.
  - Application: What other examples are there?
  - Analysis: Why? / How do you know?
  - Synthesis: How could we do better?
  - Evaluation: Agree/disagree? What can you do now you couldn't do before?

This approach to questioning is often referred to as conferencing (Earle, 2019) because a specific time is set aside and the questions asked together as part of a plan. It is very important to give the children enough wait time before they have to answer (Rowe, 1974) and you can even give children time to prepare and rehearse together as this forms part of their learning (Clarke, 2014) and social and behavioural development.

Observation

Teachers are accustomed to using observation to form micro-judgements as they teach but this can be more objectively constructed to allow assessments to be made. Observations can be planned and agreed with the class so that an objective record can be kept. Create an observation chart so that assessment points are planned and consistent across time. Observation can take place as the learners are engaged in a task whether individually or in groups. Aspects of learning to observe can include:

- How quickly do they engage with a task?
- How or how well do they reason?
- How do they describe their work?
- How well are they concentrating?
- Do they keep trying?
- Is their behaviour conducive to learning (e.g. calm, focused, good listening, etc.)
- How well are they participating?
- How confident do they appear with the language?

It is important to note the gains in children's knowledge as well as gaps, as this will mean they can be rewarded for other aspects of their learning, such as their enthusiasm or attentiveness, e.g. when engaging in a text, even if their ability is not as good. This wider acknowledgement can promote learning by encouraging a child who will eventually achieve the skills they need.

Task-based assessment

Given the very strong alignment between formative assessment and classroom activity, it can be a good idea to exploit classroom tasks and materials in an assessment, once the initial learning task has been completed. This repetition of material makes assessment tasks familiar and less daunting for the students and allows them to approach tasks with confidence. Examples of this are given in Appendix A.

Holistic tasks

Holistic assessment tasks set up the tasks in a way which requires learners to use certain non-language skills. Research (Dodge, 2009) shows that these visual or action representations increase memory, especially with very young learners, and retrieval helps address dual coding and classroom diversity in learning preferences and different ways of knowing. They can be asked to communicate their thinking or understanding in ways which are often associated with problem solving. Tasks which can be used successfully include:

- drawings, including diagrams
- creating artefacts or making a model
- doing actions
- role play
- concept mapping
- making a table or list

These tasks require learners to use language to organise information in order to make connections and to note relationships between words and concepts. This will help them to remember and reflect or apply these concepts to their own lives.

Assessing the task

As noted above, it is important to vary how tasks are assessed and who assesses. This is not just to engage learners, but because they learn differently from different people and need to be given the broadest opportunities to access understanding about their progression.

Who?	What's necessary for effective assessment? (Earle, 2019)	Advantages	Disadvantages
Teacher	Agree objectives with students Agree criteria with students Agree how judgement will work e.g. grading or comments	Teachers have a clear idea of the objectives and gain information for future planning.	Students can feel judged from 'on high'.
Peers	All students are supported with clear model of what success looks like Careful pairing or grouping so children feel safe Clarity of intent of the feedback Use of prompts and/or strategies to support (see Appendix 2) Set a time frame Monitored by the teacher	Students involved in own learning and can learn from their peers through opportunities to share ideas and strategies with others. (Double et al 2019)	Students may feel peer assessment is not valid or accurate.
Self	All students are supported with clear model of what success looks like Clarity of intent of the feedback Use of prompts and/or strategies to support (see Appendix 2) Set a time frame Monitored by the teacher	If students have the language skills to talk about their progress (in L1 or L2), they can learn to learn better. Students develop meta-cognition processes allowing them to think about how they learn, which will lead to an understanding of how to improve. (Li & Zhang, 2020)	Students may not trust their own judgement or believe in their ability to learn from this depending on the development of their meta-cognition.

Table 2: Different modes of assessment

Feedback and repetition

It is critical that children get feedback from any assessment they do and that the feedback is corrective and meaningful. Fuller details are explored in Kerr (2020). It is useful to think about the variety of ways to give feedback, e.g. whole class or individual, orally or written; but the timing of the feedback needs to be directly after the task as young learners' attention will move on. Feedback can be varied in approach. Sometimes with young learners it can be useful to give 'comfort' feedback: this reassures them while not necessarily based on learning outcomes. Usually it can be 'strategic' feedback where the teacher notes a point for improvement and gives the learners the tools to make that improvement. With young learners, there are two essential points to focus on when giving strategic feedback:

a. Young learners need to focus on a single learning point. More than one point is too much for them to absorb and reflect on and is potentially demotivating. The feedback point should be aligned to the purpose of the assessment.

b. It must be accompanied by a task or suggestion of what to do to improve; something concrete that the learner can do easily.

Once feedback has been given and the improvement task undertaken it is helpful for young learners to repeat the original task. This gives them an opportunity to demonstrate their improvement and it means they then have a model of success.

Young learners are particularly motivated to see their strengths and their achievements. Framing feedback as 'Can Do' statements, i.e. describing something that a learner can do in English, can be an engaging way of providing feedback and fostering active participation in goal setting. For example, young learners could colour in smiley faces every time they achieve a simple Can Do statement such as 'I can describe things such as my room' or 'I can tell basic stories in English'. The teacher might decide to have multiple smiley faces per Can Do statement, as learning is not linear, and repetition increases retention and confidence. Can Do statements can also be linked to specific activities to extend and reinforce learning, thereby providing a more personalised learning pathway for diverse groups of learners. For example, an extension activity related to the Can Do above might be 'Find a comic or story that you like reading. Talk about what's happening in the pictures in the comic or what happens in the story'. Another example of a 'Can do' with an extension activity is shown above in Figure 1. Can Do statements used in these ways can help foster metacognitive skills, a joy of learning and sense of achievement (Butler & Lee, 2010; Little, 2009; Little et al., 2011).

Skill	Corrective feedback point	Improve task
Reading	You read the instructions and the text very quickly so you missed important information.	Take your time. Practice reading twice – once quickly and once more slowly – before you answer questions.
Listening	I think you panicked when you didn't understand the first question so you missed the rest of the audio track.	Don't worry if you don't understand everything. Listen to the track all the way through first. Then listen again and answer the questions.
Writing	You need to use capital letters or full stops.	Copy or rewrite sentences using capital letters and full stops before trying the writing task again.
Speaking	You spoke quite fast and so it was hard to understand what you were saying.	Try pausing before answering. Take a breath between each sentence or new point.
Grammar	Sometimes the pronouns you used weren't correct so some sentences were confusing.	Practise more sentences using different personal pronouns before repeating the task.
Vocabulary	Some of the two-word phrases you used were incorrect which is confusing for the reader.	Make associations between words to help you remember them better.

Table 3: Examples of feedback and improvement tasks

Positive washback

It is inevitable that preparation for any assessment will be practised in the classroom. In the case of formative assessment, the ideal is that the assessment is designed as an outcome of classroom activity so that any tasks are familiar to the learners. However, with summative tests, it is usually the case that teachers will practise the test task in class as a way of preparing learners. This is sometimes known as 'teaching to the test'. It is best if any assessment tasks can either reflect the usual classroom practice or that any preparation is not mechanical activity, e.g. focusing on test strategy or just focusing on test questions, but actually supports learning and, if possible, connects to the world outside the classroom.

Checklist

When designing any classroom assessment, think carefully about:

- ✓ What level of language proficiency do the learners have – is it new learning or well embedded?
- ✓ How confident are the learners with the language?
- ✓ Which topics have you covered in class recently?
- ✓ How long should the task be, considering the age of the learners?
- ✓ How will you assess the task and what will you agree with the learners?
- ✓ Is the task for individuals, pairs or groups?
- ✓ How will you use the results to support learning?
- ✓ What preparation and scaffolding will the children need to do the task?

Checklist

Make sure any assessment:

- ✓ reflects classroom activities/practice
- ✓ is authentic/related to real life
- ✓ can be personalised
- ✓ reflects the purpose of learning
- ✓ is practical
- ✓ assesses doing, not knowing
- ✓ can offer meaningful feedback

Other forms of assessment

There are other ways to assess learners that allow them more thinking time and creativity and scope. These activities can also be more engaging for younger learners and include:

- **Project work** – this is where learners have an opportunity to look at several dimensions of a topic and can typically include all four language skills. It is also the opportunity to create multiple versions and young learners find this repetition helpful. The project can be helpful for mixed ability classes as children can learn from each other and they can each contribute according to their competences, including non-linguistic skills. The assessment can focus on how well the learners collaborated or how fully they participated, as well as the final result and their language work as it is important they are awarded a group grade.
- **Portfolios** – this is a collection of the learner's work which they store as a physical or digital folder. They can store a variety of work in this and it gives them a chance to keep the best version they create and/or to show how they arrived at the final version. It can include artwork as well as written work. It is essential that children understand the criteria for selection for the portfolio but this can be agreed with them so they feel some ownership. Assessing portfolios can focus on how much care and time the learner has taken; how detailed they are or how fluent a final version is as well as the content.
- **Learner-developed tasks** – these allow the learner to 'design' the assessment. This can be very simple, from deciding which words they are going to learn in a week, to how they are assessed on more complex tasks which are connected to learning objectives. The learners might decide to run these assessments as competitions or to engage in more complex collaborative tasks, especially if they are older learners. When looking at holistic tasks, the learners may be able to decide, for example, what kind of role play or acting they prefer to do or which kind of model to make. What is relevant here is that they connect their ideas to how it reflects their learning. The learners would also need to decide the assessment criteria with the teacher.



- **Digital assessment** – Digital assessments can provide a particularly motivating, intuitive and stress-free way of assessing children. They create opportunities for greater levels of personalisation and may include opportunities for interaction with multimodal and online texts. A recent example of a digital assessment is Digital for Young Learners by Cambridge English Qualifications.
- **Online assessment** – it is increasingly convenient and necessary to engage with learners online. Although there are multiple ways of managing normal learning online, teachers can become concerned about assessment because they are worried about the reliability of assessments they are giving when they cannot judge what kind of additional or outside help students have had e.g. checking mobile phones, online sources, etc. However, any assessment is the process of gathering evidence or data to allow us to form a judgement and, when managed online, may simply require a shift in approach. This shift may yield different, but nevertheless as valuable, data as any in-person classroom assessment. This alternative approach may require a modification in a teacher's mindset about assessment. It means considering a couple of factors when designing assessment tasks:
  - Having a focus on process, e.g. of the task, learner collaboration, the research, rather than outcomes.
  - Ignoring aspects of 'cheating' or the fact that learners might be having external help.

  Assessment in the synchronous classroom – assessment can be conducted through conferencing. It is not a good idea when online to have students doing a heads-down task, not because of cheating, but because it loses the dynamism and engagement of the online interaction. But direct questioning can work particularly well online. It's a good way of checking understanding. Even if some students have 'cheated' the constant repetition and analysis and/or the requirement to answer questions will focus all students on understanding. Even weaker students will learn through this assessment for learning. Learners can also report on work they have done offline and this does not need to be simply grammar and vocabulary worksheets. It could be presenting the results of a collaboration or project or research where any assessment focuses on the holistic aspects of these tasks. As with normal classroom interaction, learners would need to understand and agree the assessment criteria.

  Asynchronous assessment – the concern that many teachers have here is that they will not get a reliable performance but any offline worksheets, for example, can be checked or followed up with deep questions as above (even written questions). Part of shifting the teacher mindset is recognising that simply having to complete assessment tasks offline (e.g. to check work covered in any synchronous sessions) is helping to inform future learning. Also, if there is a digital tracking system, learners can be assessed on e.g. the time taken for a task or the number of attempts they make rather than their 'correct' score.

  The offline world is a good opportunity to ask learners to do tasks which will not work well in an online classroom e.g. research, collaboration, a presentation or to present their task in, for example, a written format or by uploading a video. The asynchronous environment can also be used to encourage learners to engage with tasks such as online learning games, etc. to test their knowledge and report back. It is also an opportunity to provide additional content for learners based on their individual performances (i.e. individualised learning paths) which can often be easier to achieve online than in the physical classroom.

Conclusion

Assessment for young learners can take multiple forms. In order to accommodate the specific needs of young learners and keep them motivated, it is important that any assessment takes a holistic approach that allows each child to achieve success in some aspect of the assessment. It is also vital that any assessment feeds back into learning and progression and that the learners can see this connection. When designing or delivering any assessment, whether formative or summative, teachers need to take into account the cognitive and behavioural developmental stages of young learners so that the assessment enhances, and does not diminish, their self-esteem. By involving the learners in the assessment process, teachers can ensure it is a positive and valuable experience. Although modes of delivery may differ, especially as learning shifts between face-to-face and online, it is important to recognise that assessment for young learners should always be for learning.

Glossary

Assessment: A broad term to refer to all methods used to collect information about learners' knowledge, ability, understanding, attitude and motivation. Assessment now encompasses a very wide range of strategies to collect the data necessary for these competences.

Assessment literacy: The ability to understand and apply the key principles in test design and delivery.

Comfort feedback: Feedback after a task designed to reassure or make the learner feel better without necessarily highlighting what they may have done wrong.

Conferencing: This is an in-depth teaching process that can involve a range of very focused activities but typically includes deep questioning following a task that requires learners to talk about their thinking. The outcome is that the teacher can use responses to gather evidence of learning in order to adjust future lessons.

Construct: A construct refers to the specific subject area for assessment. These constructs are often broken down into sub-skills. For example, reading for detail or listening for gist are constructs. Assessments should be designed so that the construct they are aiming to assess is clear.

Construct irrelevance: This is where an assessment includes material that is not being tested. It is a particular problem when the test taker cannot demonstrate the assessed skill because irrelevant or inappropriate material has been included in the assessment. For example, when a test of writing requires the test taker to process language in the instructions which is ambiguous or too complex for the level.

Evaluation: This is generally used for examining how far a learning programme meets its goals. Some assessment may be part of this, but evaluation also includes stakeholders' views and attitudes to textbooks as well as lesson content.

Formative assessment: An ongoing classroom assessment task which may assess any aspect of learning and which informs future learning.

High stakes/low stakes: This refers to the difference in the use of the test. High stakes tests are typically tests which have a life-changing result, generally in educational, employment or migrant mobility. Low stakes tests are generally seen as tests or assessments which have no significant outcome for the learner.

Learning Oriented Assessment (LOA): This is broad term for both summative and formative assessment which defines the type of assessment and/or preparation for assessment which will progress learning. This might be either because it informs the teacher or the learner.

Positive washback: This is the effect or impact a test may have on classroom learning. For example, a speaking assessment task that involves students interacting will have washback in the classroom as any practice for the test will involve and therefore improve this type of interaction. This type of activity replicates the world outside the classroom and so is seen as positive washback from the assessment.

Strategic feedback: Feedback designed to help the learner improve. It is usually accompanied by a task to create that improvement.

Summative assessment: An assessment which measures the achievement at the end of a course or period and usually reports results as a score which can be compared to other years or students.

Testing: This is one type of assessment and it is usually used to assess achievement. The outcome is a quantifiable result represented by a mark or grade.

Recommendations for further reading

Zeng, W., Huang, F., Yu, L. & Chen, S. (2018) Towards a learning-oriented assessment to improve students' learning—a critical review of literature. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability* 30 (211–250).

Assessment literacy

A101 course from Cambridge Assessment:
https://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/events/a101-assessment-training/

Language assessment in the classroom: FutureLearn free course:
https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/language-assessment/

Short videos explaining various aspects of assessment:
https://www.britishcouncil.org/exam/aptis/research/assessment-literacy/

University of Huddersfield & British Council. Assessing Young learners: a toolkit for teacher development.
https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/Assessing_young_learners_TEv10.pdf

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Author biography

Elaine Boyd is a consultant in English language assessment and has worked for a range of international testing organisations for the last 30 years. Elaine previously taught English in Spain, Italy and India, and has co-authored several exam coursebooks as well as courses for young learners. Elaine has also designed and delivered courses for teacher educators in assessment literacy and has published several articles in the field. She is an Associate Tutor in TESOL and Linguistics at the Institute of Education, University College London and her current research interests are classroom assessment and managing learner feedback.

Appendices

A: Examples of using classroom / coursebook material to assess language skills

Writing	
Aim:	communicative competence: assess learners' ability to write longer sentences
Challenge:	YLs (young learners) write minimum to get it right; worry about accuracy not communication; not writing at all because unsure if words right
Task:	write sentences for 3-picture story; one sentence per picture
Preparation:	• relate details in picture to learners' own lives • check details/vocabulary etc. in pictures in class • oral game – who can make the longest sentence OR game – improve on classmate's sentence OR • put in order • explain/elicit judgement, i.e. elicit from students what they think they should be judged/assessed on and why
Scaffolding for success:	give labels on pictures for vocabulary (NB not testing vocab) give example first sentence ask for minimum number of words per sentence (set expectation)
Criteria:	Did the sentence communicate as much information as possible?
Judgement:	scaled, e.g. *Great! Good but ... Nearly but .....*
Assessment options:	time taken / number of attempts / completeness of answer
Transferable Feedback:	must reflect criteria, e.g. • what kind of things can you say about a person? doing/clothes/look like • picture: where are the objects?

Speaking	
Aim:	communicative competence in a topic
Challenge:	YLs don't speak as worried about accuracy and/or because can't remember vocab, etc.
Task:	re-tell a reading text (whether picture story or traditional text)
Preparation:	• read with usual class task questions • specific questions, e.g. What is X doing? OR • game – cover and remember, e.g. what did X do/how many … are there/etc.? • explain/elicit judgement, i.e. elicit from students what they think they should be judged/assessed on and why
Scaffolding for success:	give the vocabulary (NB not testing vocab) model a first sentence focus on accuracy of information (not language)
Criteria:	Did their speech communicate relevant information?
Judgement:	scaled, e.g. *Great! Good but … Nearly but …..*
Assessment options:	fluency / pronunciation / accuracy / task complete / interaction
Transferable Feedback:	must reflect criteria • what can you say if you don't remember • talk about what you do know

Listening	
Aim:	listen for detail
Challenge:	YLs stop listening when they don't understand; worry about understanding every word
Task:	Listen and answer questions on detail (orally or writing)
Preparation:	• listen with usual class task questions OR • game – how many things can you remember (order not important) • explain/elicit judgement, i.e. elicit from students what they think they should be judged/assessed on and why
Scaffolding for success:	relate listening text to learners' lives think about context for listening text check any new vocabulary
Criteria:	Did they get the right kind of detail?
Judgement:	scaled, e.g. *Great! Good but ... Nearly but .....*
Assessment options:	Did they get the right kind of detail?
Transferable Feedback:	must reflect criteria • what kind of detail do you usually need from this kind of information (in the audio) i.e. get them to connect to real world knowledge

Self Assessment	
Strategy	**Rationale**
A set of badges or icons after a task where students assess (in L1 or L2) how well they feel they did, e.g. *1 badge = quite well* *2 badges = well* *3 badges = very well*	This indicates to the teacher how well their students' metacognition is developing and how much support they may need in understanding what is required for a successful performance.
A list of statements (in L1 or L2) in a chart or scale where students tick how far they feel they achieve that behaviour, e.g. *I always pay attention in class.* *Sometimes* ☐ *Usually* ☐ *Always* ☐	This is useful for assessing behavioural elements and indicates to the teacher their students' self-awareness with how they are engaging with the class. The teacher can then help with feedback on how to improve, starting with aspects that the students themselves recognises as an issue.
A self-reflection task where students decide how far they enjoyed an assessment task, e.g. ☹ = *didn't like* 😐 = *OK or don't know* 🙂 = *enjoyed task*	This allows the teacher to see how well any assessment task is working. Students will not perform well if they are not engaged, so it may mean that the teacher has to amend or change the task. However, 'didn't like' may also be the result of a learner not knowing what to do or not knowing what is being assessed so this also needs to be checked.
For any part of these strategies, the teacher can also comment on the student's decisions and this can form part of the overall assessment whilst also allowing the student to see how 'accurate' their self-judgement is. This will help them improve over time.	

Peer Assessment	
Strategy	**Rationale**
Peers check each other's work in pairs or groups before handing in. They can use their own knowledge, e.g. for vocab and grammar checks, or agreed criteria for productive skills.	This helps students understand learning outcomes and to work with criteria so they can see what is important.
Peers award a badge or star for two things a classmate has done well and a 'wish' note about what they can improve. The badges and wishes must connect to the performance descriptors or criteria agreed.	This helps students become more analytic about their own work and to see how performance descriptors can work. It also connects closely to the teacher's format of corrective feedback and how to improve.
Classmates can present something to each other in a closed group. The peer group can ask questions and give suggestions of how to improve.	Students do presentations more confidently as they have the knowledge gained from their peers; they start to view their peers as a resource and learn to work collaboratively and value what each student is good at.

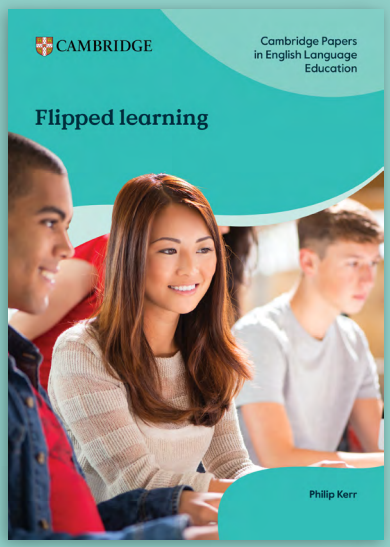


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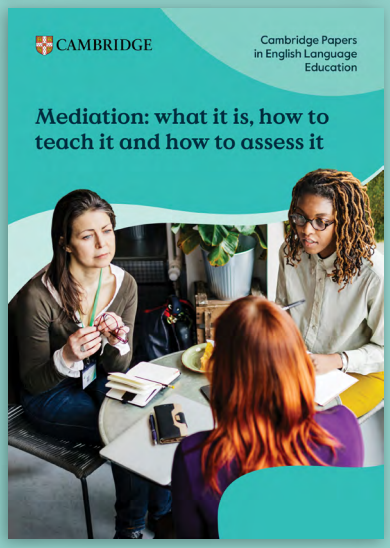
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